

Glastonbury: A Symbol of the British Identity

by Ben Jardine

“There’s a kind of euphoria down here that takes us away from the awful realities of life.”

- Michael Eavis, Glastonbury Festival founder

The Glastonbury Festival to Britain is, in essence, the most major symbol of music consumption in the latter quarter of the 20th century. Wrought with the eccentricities of the counterculture movement in Britain in the seventies, the festival began as a haven for music listeners to go and experience their favorite musicians for close to no price at all, emulating the free music festival movement taking place in the late sixties. The above words of festival organizer, Michael Eavis, spoken during the inaugural festival in 1970, seem to accurately reflect the nature of the festival and its appeal to the British population. What makes the Glastonbury Festival so integral to British popular culture and national identity lies in its ability to attract people from all walks of life, from all around the world to one destination to celebrate music. In the early days of the festival, performers were exclusively British, playing British music that the entire world knew. In recent years, however, festival organizers have begun to reach out to international performers to attract more global audiences.

Perhaps Glastonbury’s most bizarre accolade is its history. Ancient religious records depict Joseph of Arimathea (Jesus Christ’s alleged uncle) visiting the South of England during his time as a tin trader. What’s more is that he is said to have brought his nephew with him on one occasion, to Glastonbury. Furthermore, some centuries later, it is said that monks from Glastonbury Abbey discovered the bones of King Arthur and his queen.

Between the years of 1914 and 1926, a series of Glastonbury festivals took place in Somerset. The festivals, cultural events founded by socialist composer Rutland Boughton, stressed the practice of the fine arts (in the form of theatre, poetry, and music) to the local youth population. Among the festivals' financial supporters was George Bernard Shaw, and suddenly an alternative form of Britishness appeared. When Boughton was there, longhaired music lovers descended upon the festival grounds, in search of the Utopian ideals Boughton preached during a time of world war.

Half a century later local dairy farmer, Michael Eavis, decided to tap into that idea of alternativeness with a music festival of his very own. The first Glastonbury festival, inspired by the likes of Woodstock festival and the Isle of Wight festival the year before featured a strong lineup, one which included The Kinks (who were later replaced by glam rock icons, Tyrannosaurus Rex), Jethro Tull, and Indian infused progressive rockers, Quintessence. Admission was £1.

The 1971 Glastonbury Festival (also named the Glastonbury Fayre) went a bit different than its predecessor. Now in the hands of an organizing group (composed of: the leader of the counterculture movement in Britain, Andrew Kerr; the granddaughter of Sir Winston Churchill, Arabella Churchill; and Skin Alley bassist Thomas Crimble), the Glastonbury Fayre boasted the headlining talents of David Bowie, and admission was free. Over twelve thousand people attended the Fayre in 1971, and a new stage was built. The "Pyramid Stage", a one-tenth replica of the Great Pyramid of Giza and built on the Glastonbury-Stonehenge ley line, has played host to the festival's headliners since its construction.

Glastonbury in the eighties saw the fixture of annual festivals, unlike the previous decade where there were just four planned. The 1981 festival saw Eavis take over entirely, and was

organized in conjunction with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). A brand new and permanent Pyramid Stage was built (with parts repurposed from the Ministry of Defense), and that year's festival marked the first in which the organizers made a profit. In turn, Eavis donated £20,000 to the CND. In years to come, proceeds would go to organizations like Greenpeace, Oxfam, and WaterAid. The CND continued to be involved in the festival throughout the eighties, and CND spokespersons spoke at the festival in 1983 and 1984. EP Thompson, perhaps most importantly, spoke in 1984 to a crowd of 35,000 people (and just after The Smiths' 6:00 p.m set), urging nuclear disarmament. Thompson, one of the most prolific members of the Communist Party in Great Britain, and his speech signaled the beginning of a more politicized Glastonbury than in the past few years. And that inclusion of politics seemed to increase as the years went on, when in the nineties a push was made to make Greenpeace the major beneficiary.

The nineties saw more successful festivals, with bigger names performing. The 1994 festival saw major television coverage, which allowed the performance of dance/acid house duo, Orbital, to reach legendary status and gain recognition for their musical style. Up until this point, mainstream media and the establishment had attacked such music, to which Michael Eavis noted, "What was previously underground made it on to one of the big stages, and there was no going back from there."

In the late nineties, the festival saw increasing numbers of attendees and the need to increase fence stability and security arose, as fans breached the fences all over the festival ground. Reports of the number of fence-jumpers apparently doubled the amount of ticketholders. Perhaps the reason for the increased *need* to get into the festival was because of the appearance of more international and more globally recognized performers. Rage Against the Machine, Johnny Cash, R.E.M, Foo Fighters, Bob Dylan and Bjork were all featured on bills throughout

the latter half of the decade. This half of the decade also featured the number of festivalgoers to exceed 100,000.

2002 was the first year in which ticket prices exceeded £100, and like the years just preceding it, the festival seemed to be moving towards a more commercial and international festival. Legend Roger Waters headlined the bill with Rod Stewart on Sunday evening on the Pyramid Stage, while Orbital returned again for the masses of dance music fans on the Other Stage, Saturday night. Though moving in a more commercial direction, the festival still managed to maintain its grassroots persona with 32% of all waste recycle including 110 tons of organic waste composted, coffee and chocolate provided by Fair Trade, and over £1 million raised for Greenpeace, Oxfam, and Water Aid. The festival saw Paul McCartney headline with a little help from Oasis and Toots and the Maytals. Attendance surpassed 150,000.

Controversy was struck in 2008, when Jay-Z was announced to headline the Pyramid Stage Saturday night. To many in Britain, Jay-Z symbolized something different to what Glastonbury had stood for in the past, to which Eavis responded, saying that he wanted to “break with tradition this time and put on something totally different”. The real reason perhaps, and that he later admitted, “He will appeal to the young people and under-25s for sure, so that's a big pull for them”. What is interesting here is that the founder of the festival himself is looking to break that tradition of solely British musicians performing in the peaceful British countryside. Before, there were glam rock stars, David Bowie and T.Rex, but in comes Jay-Z, perhaps the most commercially successful rapper of all time, who happens to be American. The announcement, which came from a report by BBC Somerset, sparked outcry throughout Britain and the world, including a critique from Oasis's Noel Gallagher. Jay-Z responded by opening his set with a

tongue-in-cheek rendition of “Wonderwall”. Pop superstar (and Jay-Z’s wife), Beyoncé, closed 2011’s festival.

The 2010 Glastonbury Festival was the festival’s 40th, and a fresh buzz of anticipation began to flood through the Worthy farm area. Car parks opened a day earlier that year, but the festival goers still managed to cause traffic jams in many parts of the south of England and Wales, in particular, on the M5 and M4. Sunday was given a downside, however, when England were defeated by Germany (4-1) in the World Cup. Two fields at the festival played host to that match, with over 80,000 fans in attendance. Such a notion indicates the festival still holding onto its Britishness, if not, certainly its Englishness. Some performers from the 1970 festival even returned, including DJ Mad Mick, who played the 2010 festival’s opening tune.

Today, as it was since its origins, the Glastonbury Festival is a place of pilgrimage. Teens obsessed with their favorite bands flock to Worthy farm in what seems to have become a £210 “rite of passage” for Britain’s youth, while festival goers from the early days of the event still return. The bands and musicians performing seems to repeat, with British performers like David Bowie, Elvis Costello, The Cure, Radiohead, and Coldplay playing the festival multiple times. Many have criticized the festival’s apparent transformation into a more commercialized event, with ticket prices exceeding £100 in 2003 from the modest price of £8 in 1981. Yet, no one can deny that it represents a symbol of British identity. From the spot’s early history, which is said to be scattered with religious and sacred foundations, to its now thriving commercial festival, the sense of Britishness has not faded.

What started out as a festival inspired by the counterculture movement has somehow retained elements of that era, and adapted to a changing music industry and youth culture. The Glastonbury Festival has changed from its days of simple and single dimensions (counterculture,

CND, etc.), and has become a behemoth of political, national, musical, creative, and youth expression. The festival is still undeniably British, yet with a flair of international creativeness and political statement.

References Consulted

"Party Politics." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 21 June 2000. Web. 06 May 2014.

"Welcome To Glastonbury Festivals." *Glastonbury Festivals News*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 May 2014.